



DOWNTOWN TOWSON DISTRICT OVERVIEW

Baltimore County Department of Planning

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DOWNTOWN TOWSON DISTRICT

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1.1 BACKGROUND

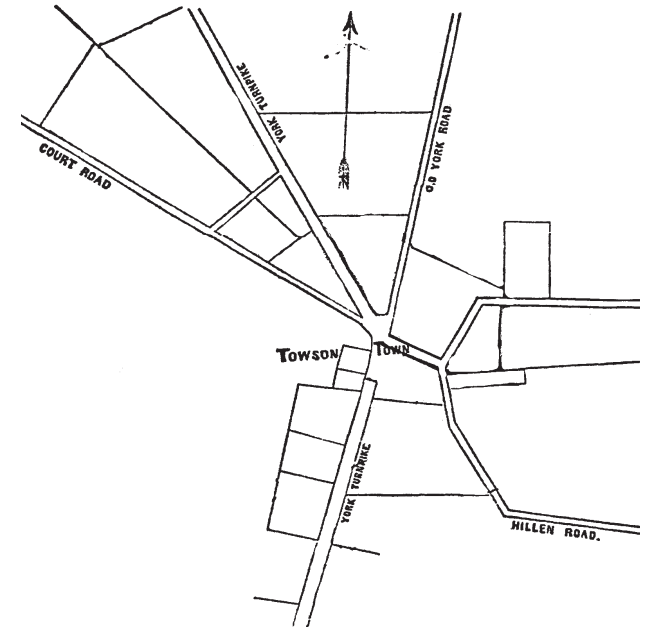
Master Plan 2020, as well as previous master plans, lays out a land management framework and accompanying policy to guide 90 percent of the County's population into one third of the County's land area. This allows the county to preserve natural and agricultural resources in the rural areas, while infrastructure investments, public services and community sustainability are focused in the urban areas.

Towson has historically been the County's only urban center. Guiding principles and resource allocation throughout the last several decades have been preparing downtown Towson to be able to accommodate the growth, density and

urban environment that is now coming to fruition. Development currently in the pipeline will be transformative in taking Towson from its "suburban village" image to the urban center that has been planned and envisioned. As the growth and development continues, it is imperative that the policies and actions of Master Plan 2020 be implemented. The central Master Plan policy for Towson is to strengthen compact mixed use walkable redevelopment that is compatible with Towson's urban character. The specific action to implement this calls for "the development of design standards and modifications to the zoning ordinance that create mixed use zones." (Master Plan 2020, p 84)

County Council Resolution 113-14 requested the creation of two new zoning classifications for Towson and this report focuses on the first such zone that is to be solely for the downtown Towson area. The resolution cites the Master Plan goals for Towson and recognizes the failings of achieving them through piecemeal amendments to the existing CT District of Towson. The following report provides a brief history of Towson planning efforts, identifies deficiencies within the current zoning regulations, outlines the zoning overlay district that is specific to refining the urban character of Towson, and provides design guidelines by which to evaluate development and redevelopment projects in downtown Towson.

1.0 INTRODUCTION



1.2 HISTORY

Over the last 20 years, Baltimore County has engaged in numerous planning efforts focusing on Towson. These efforts have ranged in scope from examining regulatory measures such as zoning, urban design standards, and architecture review, to developing financial incentives for targeted blocks, all in an effort to develop Towson as the County's Urban Center.

The following section contains a brief chronology and description of those individual efforts. All of these planning efforts have been in concert with the Baltimore County Master Plan 2020 which outlines recommendations and actions aimed at achieving the vision of making Towson a premier urban center. Each

successive plan has promoted higher density redevelopment, with an ever increasing emphasis on regulatory changes that foster and promote high quality design.



1.3 PREVIOUS PLANS

Towson Community Plan

Adopted in 1992, the plan focused on design to promote growth in downtown while protecting the identity of the residential communities. The Plan addresses urban design in the core area, however, it was adopted over two decades ago, and does not address the realities of Towson today.

The Greater Towson Committee's Opportunity Plan

This document, developed by the Towson Development Corporation (now the Greater Towson Committee) outlines an inventory of redevelopment sites located in the Towson Core. Each site is detailed with the planning objective, development opportunities and constraints, property

ownership, and acreage. It has been used as a real estate development marketing tool offering site specific information.

Towson UDAT

A visioning exercise undertaken in 2006, examined Towson's strengths and weaknesses--advocating for the urbanization of downtown Towson. This exercise sought extensive input from the business community and surrounding residential communities during the process.

Walkable Towson Charrette

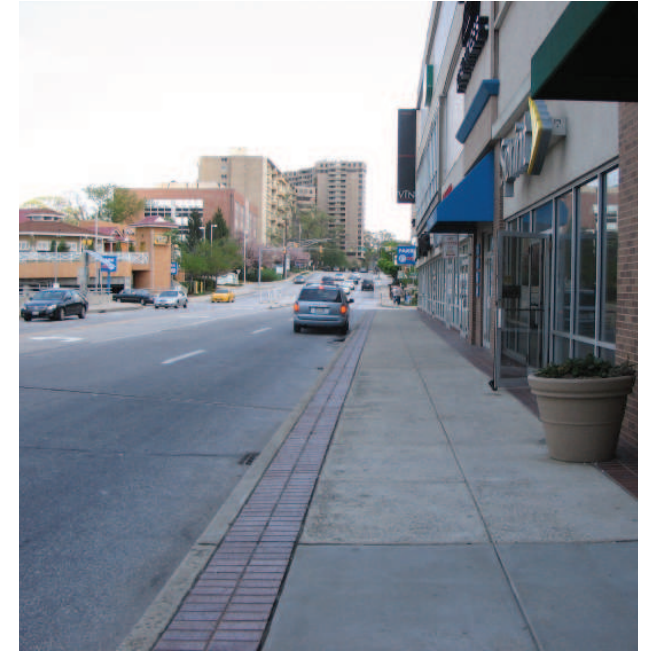
Held in 2007, this workshop developed concepts to improve walkability. The charrette proposed a master plan, a

walkability index, as well as building design principles. As a result, the Walkable Towson Plan was created in 2008 implementing a set of design principles using a form based code approach. The "walkable" area has a smaller boundary and does not include the entire downtown.

Commercial Revitalization District

Properties located within the district are targeted for revitalization using financial, design, and marketing incentives. This program is designed to incentivize major development projects and improve building facades of small businesses to assist them in staying competitive.

1.0 INTRODUCTION



1.4 EXISTING LAW

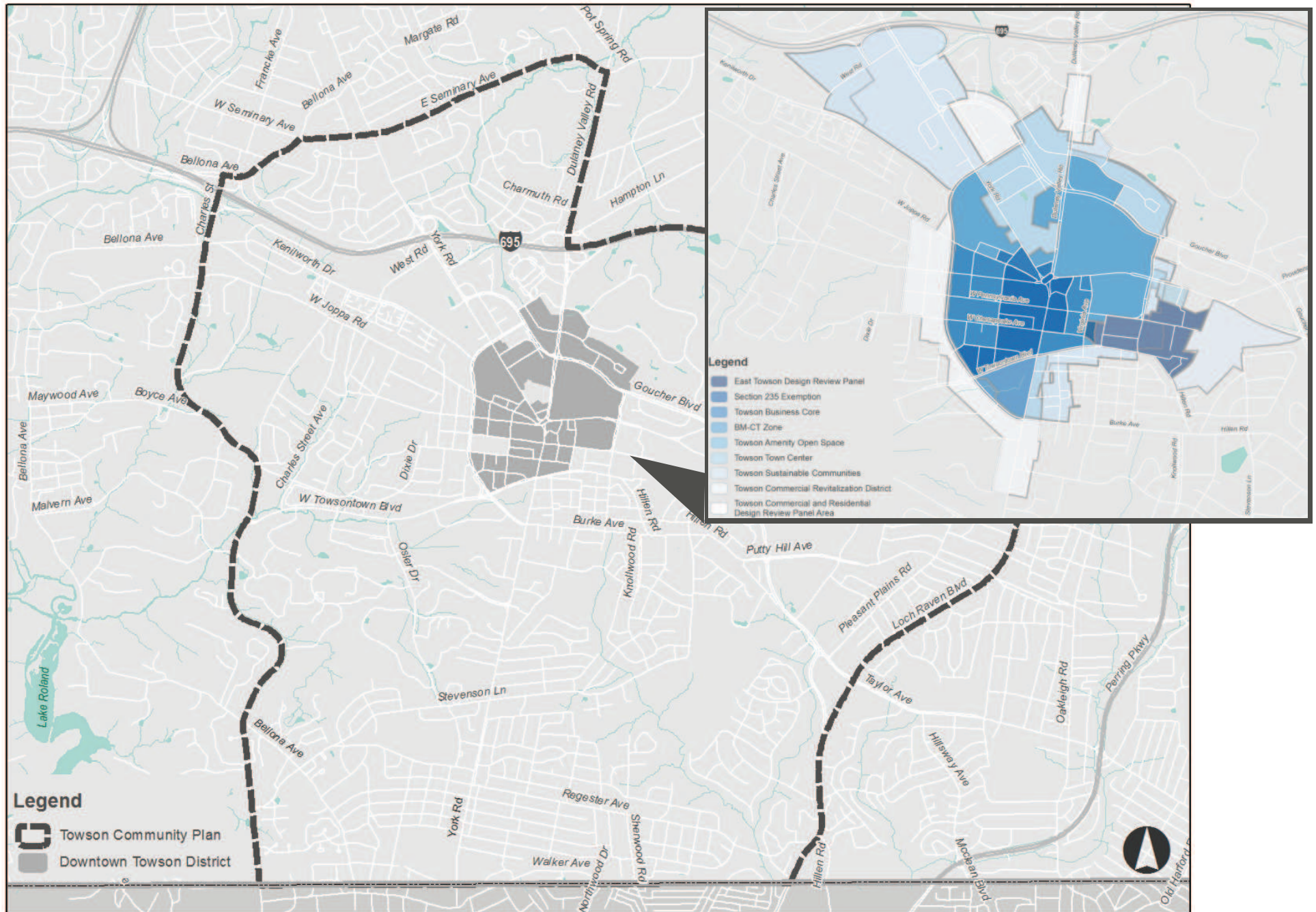
An unintended consequence of the numerous planning processes has unfortunately resulted in the implementation of zoning and special regulations that are fragmented and often contradictory to each other. Currently, there are ten separate designations/zones and overlay districts that currently apply to some part of the Towson urban center including:

1. **Towson Community Plan**
2. **BM-CT Zone**
3. **East Towson Design Review Panel Area**
4. **Exemption Area**
5. **Town Center designation**

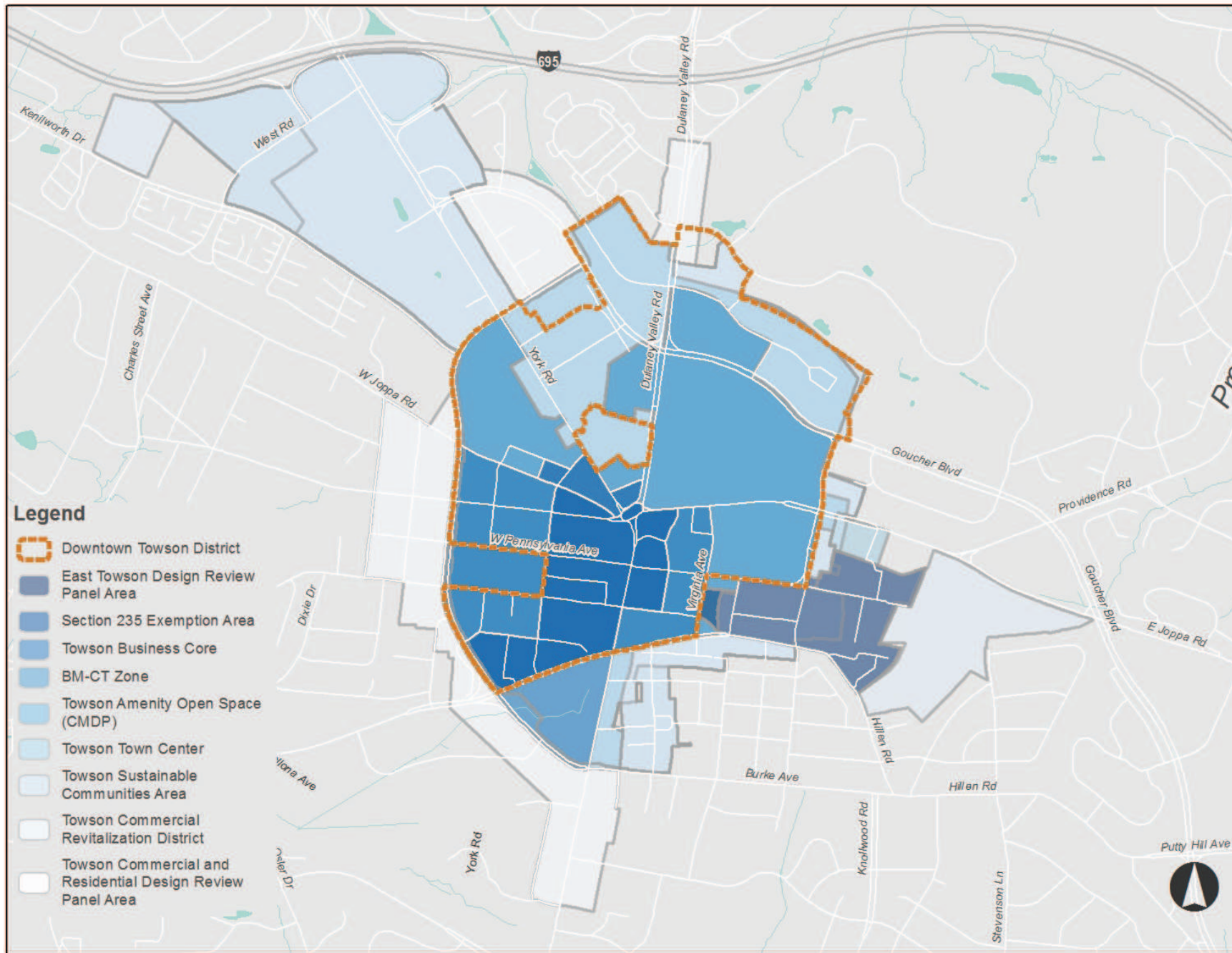
6. **Towson Commercial and Residential Design Review Panel Area**
7. **Towson Business Core/Alternate Process**
8. **Towson Revitalization District**
9. **Towson Amenity Open Space Section of the Comprehensive Manual of Development Policies (CMDP)**
10. **Towson Sustainable Communities Area**

While each of these districts/zones addresses a specific Towson development goal, they do not build on one another, and their fragmented nature hinders the comprehensive redevelopment of Towson.

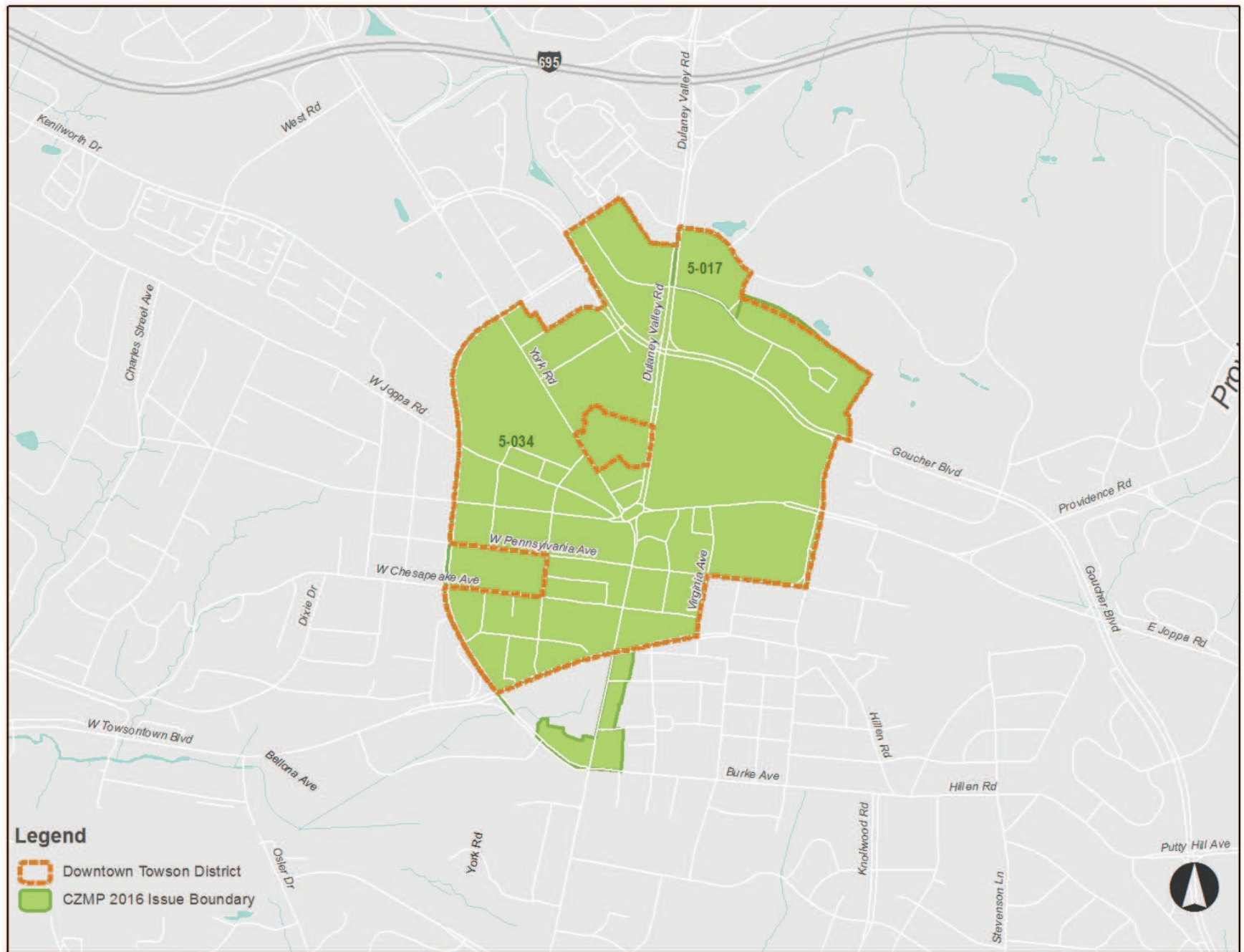
Problems with the multiple, overlapping districts are numerous: some laws are grandfathered while others are retroactive resulting in different standards for different land parcels. Some are difficult to understand and apply and therefore have not been used by the development community since their inception. There are also multiple approval procedures with different levels of review. County wide regulations originally drafted to address greenfield suburban development are often awkwardly amended to try to "fit" Towson. Finally, many of the districts have slightly different boundaries, creating additional disconnection in an area that should be addressed comprehensively.



MAP 1 EXISTING OVERLAY DISTRICTS



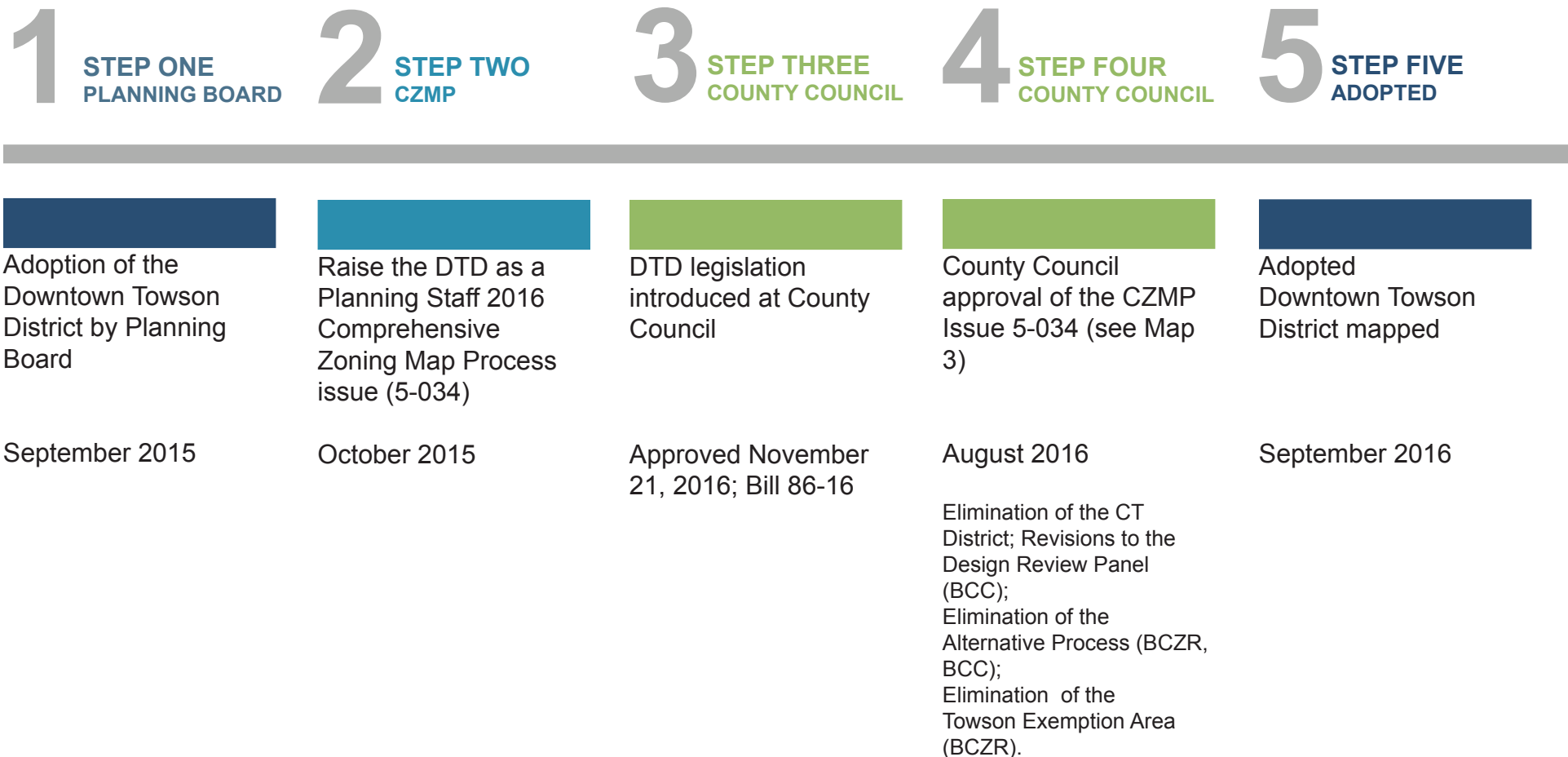
MAP 2 PROPOSED DOWNTOWN TOWSON OVERLAY DISTRICT



MAP 3 CZMP 2016 ISSUE BOUNDARY

1.0 INTRODUCTION

TABLE A: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DOWNTOWN TOWSON DISTRICT





2.1 NEW APPROACH

The Department of Planning suggests a new comprehensive review process in the form of an overlay district that is design oriented. This approach builds upon and unifies the various plans and regulations that have been successively recognizing the importance of high quality urban design in Towson.

The goals of instituting a new approach are to:

1) Encourage mixed use development by providing more flexible development opportunities

2) Foster improved site and architectural design by a) requiring the use of high

quality building materials, b) enabling signature statuesque buildings at strategic locations, and c) integrating urban design components into the public realm

3) Encourage economic vitality through mixed-use development.

This approach acknowledges a very clear and definite distinction between the physical form of downtown Towson and the form of the greater Towson communities that surround it. Development within the Urban Center will be reviewed using urban growth and design principles contained within this document. The surrounding suburban neighborhoods will continue to use community conserva-

tion efforts outlined in the 1992 Towson Community Plan to address quality of life issues.

2.0 INTENT



2.2 DESIGN

As the Towson Urban Center evolves, the role for high quality design is critical. In an effort to create a vibrant highly desirable mixed use district, less emphasis will be placed on the rules of Euclidian zoning and land use and more on the characteristics of design that make an urban area function well. As Master Plan 2020 suggests, the downtown is poised to be a dynamic, economically viable commercial center. This requires thoughtful architectural design, buildings and spaces with character, efficient pedestrian movement, variety in design that is contextual and complementary, and active street frontages and sidewalks. Each new development and/or building will contribute significantly to the comprehensive look and cohesive

feel of the district. The creation of the DTD overlay district seeks to achieve this high quality and functioning environment through the use of project review by design professionals as part of the County's Design Review Panel (DRP) process.

THE DESIGN REVIEW PANEL WILL EVALUATE EACH DEVELOPMENT BASED ON FIVE CRITERIA

How does the project relate in scale, height, massing, and design with the surrounding context of downtown Towson which is evolving substantially?

How is the public realm defined and connected with proposed street and sidewalk patterns?

Is the landscape and site design appropriate for the surrounding context and proposed uses?

Does the design positively improve Towson's existing character?

Does the project take an innovative approach to design, materials, public art, economic opportunities, environmental sustainability, and living opportunities for a diverse population?

2.3 DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

The goal of the Design Review Panel (DRP) is to provide the Administrative Law Judge and the Department of Planning with design expertise in the areas of urban design, architecture, and landscape design for all proposed development and redevelopment projects. Unlike their limited role in the past where only major commercial projects in Towson have been reviewed, under new policy in the DTD overlay, all development will require mandatory design review at either an administrative level or by convening the DRP.

The DRP will render a recommendation to the hearing officer that is non-binding.

The DRP will use a set of guidelines by which to evaluate projects. Specifically, they will examine site planning, circulation, building elevations and materials, landscaping and civic space.

All applications shall be processed through the Department of Permits, Approvals and Inspections and require a \$300 fee for review. The administrative review shall be conducted by the Department of Planning's DRP Coordinator and the DRP Chairperson. All comments and approvals of the administrative review will be rendered by the DRP Chairperson and the DRP Coordinator.

2.0 INTENT

ALL development within the DTD

Staff determination
on process

Letter issued to applicant

As stated previously, Towson is the County's only urban center, and is unique by design. The DTD exempts development from the traditional suburban and prescriptive zoning regulations governing setbacks, height, floor area ratio, and density, as well as parking. The DTD requires a more intensive design review process to regulate all levels of development and redevelopment based on a set of urban design guidelines.

Proposed development within the DTD will be processed through the Administrative Law Judge. Limited Exemptions, CRG or JSPC amendments or refinements, facade improvements, and certain building permit will be subject to the Design Guidelines outlined in this document.

* Additions and facade improvements, in terms of size, location, and the extent of changes will be evaluated by the Department of Planning on a case-by-case basis as to whether they shall be an administrative or full DRP review.

TABLE B: ALL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE DOWNTOWN TOWSON DISTRICT

TYPE	PROCESS	
	DESIGN REVIEW PANEL	ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW
Limited Exemptions *	<input type="radio"/>	
Full process development plans	<input type="radio"/>	
PUDs	<input type="radio"/>	
Signage		
Rooftop	<input type="radio"/>	
Changeable copy	<input type="radio"/>	
Freestanding	<input type="radio"/>	
Comprehensive sign packages	<input type="radio"/>	
Facade	<input type="radio"/>	
Sign proposals developed through Architect-on-Call		<input type="radio"/>
Replacement awning or canopy		<input type="radio"/>
Other		<input type="radio"/>
Comprehensive exterior facade alterations	<input type="radio"/>	
Parking facilities	<input type="radio"/>	
Comprehensive landscape plans	<input type="radio"/>	
Exterior painting		<input type="radio"/>
New windows		<input type="radio"/>
Tree removal		<input type="radio"/>
Tree planting		<input type="radio"/>
Deck		<input type="radio"/>
Outdoor seating		<input type="radio"/>
Fences		<input type="radio"/>
Roof replacement (without change to roofline)		<input type="radio"/>
New street lighting		<input type="radio"/>
New building lighting		<input type="radio"/>
Projects using the County's Architect-on-Call program		<input type="radio"/>
Murals		<input type="radio"/>
Bike Racks		<input type="radio"/>
Street furniture		<input type="radio"/>



The purpose of the design guidelines for the Downtown Towson District is to provide clear, comprehensive guidance outlining the considerations the DRP and Department of Planning must undertake when reviewing and making recommendations about development in the DTD. The guidelines acknowledge the evolving mixed-use, urban character of downtown Towson. The guidelines are not mandatory, and some may be inapplicable or unachievable for certain projects. In these cases, the applicant shall explain how the overall objectives will be met. Urban site design and architectural guidelines are divided into 7 general categories including:

- Environmental Sustainability
- Block Configuration/Site Design
- Parking
- Downtown Open Space
- Building Principles/Architecture
- Building Materials
- Lighting and Signage



3.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

3.1.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Developments should be designed to achieve green building standards equivalent to the silver standard of either the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) or the National Green Building Standards (NGBS). While LEED or NGBS Silver certifications are not required, preliminary information regarding any target design parameters related to LEED or NGBS standards shall be provided to the DRP upon request by the DRP, known at the time of DRP review.

Stormwater management shall be incorporated into all development projects to reduce run-off, improve water quality, and

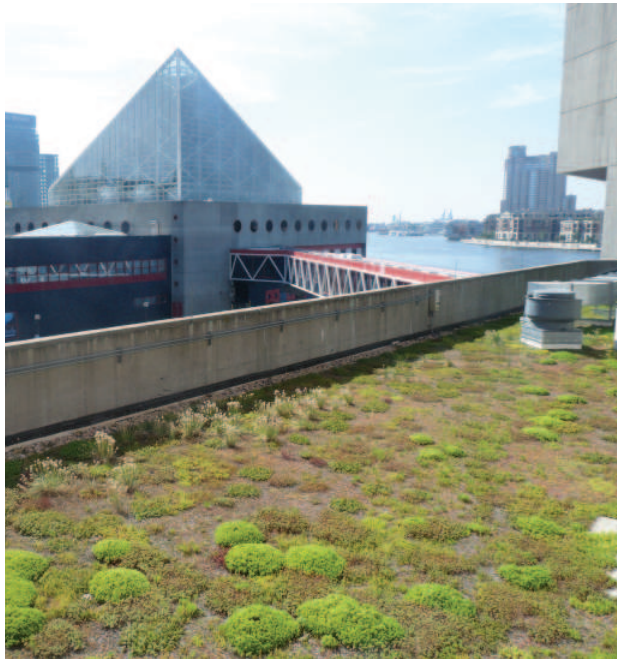
increase groundwater recharge. Preservation of existing trees is strongly encouraged in all proposed development projects. Mature trees, with a diameter of breast height (DBH) of 10 inches or more shall be retained. Except where the tree is:

- 1) Dead, diseased, or injured beyond restoration as determined by a certified arborist or licensed forester.
- 2) Interferes with the location of a structure, utilities, other critical site improvements, or construction access.
- 3) If a mature tree is removed as defined in this section, multiple trees with diameters that add up to the diameter

of the tree being removed shall be planted on-site or elsewhere in the DTD, provided a location is available.

Any proposed planting areas and species selection for street trees shall conform to urban street tree best practices including adequate root trenches to accommodate new soil volume and minimum soil depth that ensures the long term health of the trees being planted. The interior dimension of tree pits or planting strips should be a minimum of 10 feet long and 6 feet wide if there is sufficient sidewalk width for pedestrian traffic.

The requirements or locations for plantings may be eliminated or precluded by the



3.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

location of signage, utilities, street lights, and other pre-existing and proposed infrastructure.

The use of light colored or high albedo surfaces are suggested to reduce the heat island effect on the top level of parking structures and surface parking lots.

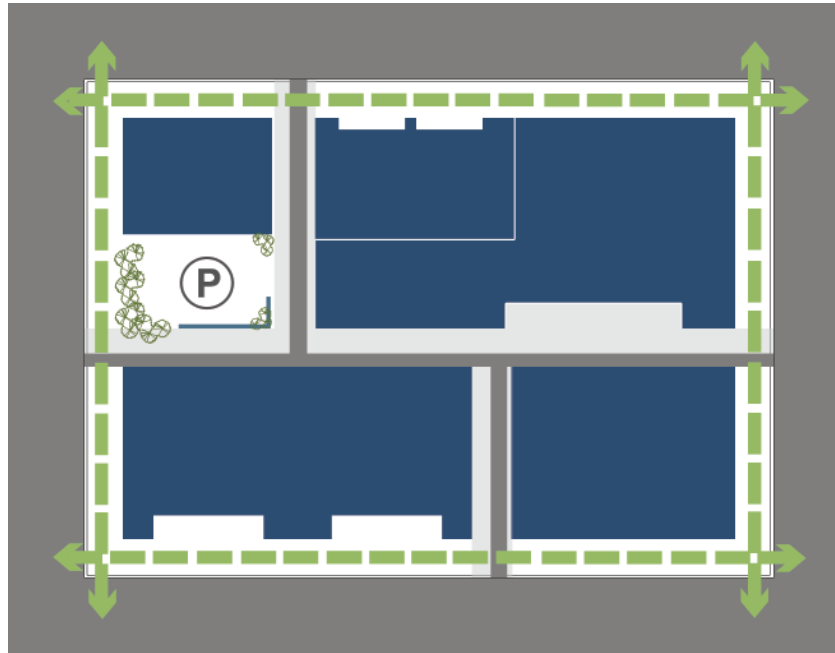
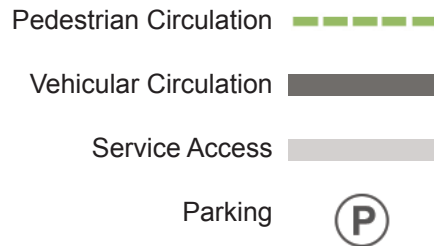
The use of native canopy trees is strongly encouraged in parking lots, downtown open spaces, and streetscapes.

When designing and developing outdoor spaces, sustainable practices should be used to reduce energy and water use, minimize run-off, and improve stormwater quality, prevent air pollution, reduce the

heat island effect, and include green space to provide relief from the built environment.

The use of green roofs, cool roofs, and solar panels should be considered for both aesthetic and environmental benefits.

3.0 GUIDELINES



3.2 BLOCK CONFIGURATION & SITE DESIGN

3.2.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Block configuration should respect adjacent buildings and should result in a cohesive pedestrian realm along streets and alleys.

Primary building facades should be oriented toward the street and the pedestrian realm.

Buildings should line the sidewalk and frame the public realm.

Surface parking areas should be screened by architectural and landscape treatments.

Corners of blocks should be given specific design consideration and should be emphasized by locating unique architectural features, entrances, or special streetscape features at corner locations.

Where there are midblock connections, pedestrian amenities and entrances to uses should be included to break up large building wall expanses.

Pathways from parking areas to the street should have purpose, be safe and be visually interesting.

The number of curb cuts should be minimized to reduce conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles.



3.3 PARKING

3.3.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Parking Structures

The design of parking structures should be architecturally integrated with the design and structure of the buildings they serve.

Facades of a parking structure that should be visible to the public should be treated in such a way as to maintain a high level of architectural design and finish, minimizing blank walls.

Facades on parking structures should be activated with ground floor uses and/or pedestrian amenities.

Parking structures should have signage that clearly identify parking opportunities.

The horizontal and vertical elements of the parking structure façade should complement those of adjacent structures.

Parking structures should be designed to conceal, as much as possible, the view of all parked cars and angled ramps from adjacent plazas, public rights of way, private streets and plazas or open space.

The location of all parking garage access points should be placed to minimize the impact to the public realm or adjacent uses.

3.0 GUIDELINES



3.3 PARKING

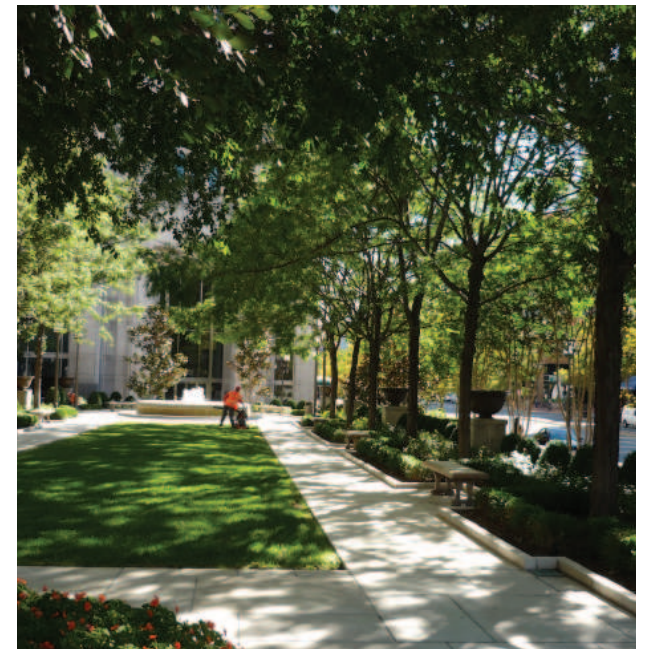
3.3.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Off Street Surface Parking

Shade trees should be located throughout all surface parking areas. The use of native canopy trees is encouraged.

Proposed surface parking areas should be landscaped to meet Class B standards as specified in the Baltimore County Landscape Manual, with screening walls or fences.

Proposed landscaping, walls, or fences shared reflect the urban character of the Downtown Towson District.



3.4.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

The DRP shall require, to the greatest extent possible, projects to incorporate downtown open space that include aesthetics, recreation, or gathering areas at the street level, with a goal of providing 5 percent of gross acreage of the site. However, the DRP should determine the quantity and quality of the downtown open space by using the following objectives, including the size of the site and useability of the space or other reasonable criteria.

Downtown open space is exterior and open to the public and may include plazas, public courtyards, pathways, planters, streetscapes, civic spaces,

or green spaces that allow for gathering, cafe seating, entertainment, or art. If the width from the building facade to face of curb includes sidewalk and exceeds 7 feet, the width in excess of 7 feet qualifies as downtown open space.

Downtown open space should be located on-site and when feasible connected to neighboring properties to create a cohesive open space network serving people who live, work, and shop downtown.

Downtown open space should be provided to give relief and interest to the streetscape.

Downtown open space should be

3.4 DOWNTOWN OPEN SPACE

appropriate to the scale and character of the development.

Downtown open space should be designed to be easily accessible to the public and provide year round use where possible.

Downtown open space should be made comfortable by using architectural and landscape elements to create a sense of place and security.

Blank walls shall be limited and downtown open space should be considered an integrated part of the design.

3.0 GUIDELINES



3.4 DOWNTOWN OPEN SPACE

3.4.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES (continued)

The development of downtown open space for building users should be integrated into all design.

Trash and recycling receptacles should be strategically placed.

Downtown open space should feature entrances to retail/restaurant spaces along their perimeters to activate the space.

Paving material of varied physical texture, color and pattern should be used to guide movement and define functional areas.

The use of trees for shading and cooling is encouraged.

Downtown open space should be designed for all ages.

Bicycle racks and storage shall be incorporated into the design of proposed developments.

A consistent framework of materials and treatment is suggested for the public realm of the DTD in order to blend with what has already been built and landscaped. These standards are taken from Section F (Towson Streetscape Standards) of the Comprehensive Manual

of Development Policies (CMDP); and are as follows:

- 1) Street trees, 30-50 feet on center
- 2) Brick paving edge along the curb, 16 inches in width.
- 3) Decorative lighting, 60 feet on center.



3.5 BUILDING PRINCIPLES & ARCHITECTURE

3.5.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

A wide variety of appropriate architectural styles, materials and details throughout the district are encouraged to create a thriving, attractive district.

New buildings should be contextual in scale and style to the surrounding structures, where practical.

Variation in building scaling and detail should relate to the scale and function of pedestrian active uses along the streets.

All visible sides of the building should be given design consideration, including the roofs.

All building sides should be designed purposefully.

New buildings should fit within the context in terms of mass and scale to enhance the character of a block or street, where practical.

The location of buildings should define and contain the street space in order to concentrate and reinforce pedestrian activity.

Portions of the building that are not aligned with the right of way line should be related to the building uses that complement pedestrian activities along

the street such as plazas, patios, and building entries.

Use of structural bays, expressed columns, window mullions, horizontal fenestration, etc. should be utilized to promote a pedestrian scale.

Design of new development that is directly contiguous to single family residential communities should respect the scale, form, and development pattern of the existing community. Specifically:

- 1) Architectural massing and site design should be carefully considered to ensure an effective transition between

3.0 GUIDELINES



3.5 BUILDING PRINCIPLES & ARCHITECTURE

3.5.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES (continued)

- the DT and the directly contiguous community.
- 2) The scale of the buildings that directly border a single family residential community should be reduced by stepping back the upper stories of the building to reduce the impact on adjacent properties.
 - 3) Building lighting and/or street lighting fixtures that directly abut single family residential communities shall be sited in such a way to minimize light spillage into the residential community.

Rooftop equipment should be fully screened from horizontal view along the street frontages of the subject site. Screenings should be expressed as part of the buildings' composition and fully integrated architecturally.

Building corners should be given special treatment. This may include signature entries, special roof shapes and taller, iconic architectural elements.

Variations in fenestration patterns should be used to emphasize building features such as entries, shifts in building form or differences in function and use. Building rooftops and parapets should

enhance the character of the skyline and strengthen the identity of individual buildings.

Ground floor use should be activated and activities in new developments should be integrated with existing retail uses and activities along the street front and provide flexibility for changing market demands.

The ground level of buildings should be developed to provide visual interest to pedestrians. This means either outdoor dining areas, retail display windows or service oriented activities that can be viewed through storefront glazing. If the building face at the sidewalk edge cannot be glazed, then the blank wall should



3.6 BUILDING MATERIALS

be treated in an interesting way with architectural finishes, screens, display cases, sculpture, murals or plant material.

If the façade wall is to be set back from the property line to create courtyards or niches, then other elements (such as columns, planters, changes in paving materials, or railings) should be used to define the street wall.

3.6.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Innovative use of high quality materials should be encouraged.

The character and image should be reinforced by using high quality materials, texture, patterns, and colors in well-designed innovative ways including the utilization of natural materials that will age well.

Finishes and materials should reinforce those used in that architectural style originally, where practical. The consistent use of quality materials appropriate to the urban environment should be ensured. Human-scale buildings should be

encouraged through the use of well detailed and articulated materials, individually and in combination. Material selection on the ground floor should be given careful consideration to aid in creating a pleasing pedestrian environment in addition to being able to weather well.

All visible facades of a building from the public realm should be treated equally in terms of materials, color and design detail, where practical. The building should have a finished appearance on all sides.

The use of replacement materials that imitate or falsely replicate natural material applications should be avoided.

3.0 GUIDELINES



3.7 LIGHTING & SIGNAGE

3.7.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Lighting should be used to provide illumination that complements the aesthetic appeal and safety, thereby promoting comfortable, safe pedestrian activity at night.

Highlighting of significant architectural features, trees and artwork with accent lighting should be considered.

Lighting associated with signage on the upper stories of a building or a rooftop should not become overwhelming or dominant in the skyline.

Fixtures shall minimize skyglow, glare, and light trespass and conform to best practices as identified by the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America.

Fixtures should be designed and installed in scale and context with the architecture of the building.

Light sources on private development should complement lighting within the public realm of the district.

Lighting as a nighttime amenity should be considered.



3.7 LIGHTING & SIGNAGE

3.7.2 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Signs shall be oriented towards and scaled for the pedestrian realm.

Signs should be integrated within the architectural features of the façade and complement the building's architecture.

Signs on rooftops and the upper stories of a building should have a proportional relationship between the size of the building and the size of the sign. These types of signs should have a corresponding design to the building architecture and not become overwhelming or dominant in the skyline.

Signs should not be designed to maximize square footage but instead be to enhance their graphic impact to the public (pedestrian realm).

Signs should add visual interest, facilitate way finding and enhance the character of the area.

Signage should be located and designed to avoid conflicts with street trees and street lights.



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